

“GODS SECOND MAISTER PEECE. THE WOMAN”.
MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY ADDRESSING WOMEN IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLISH.

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of the medical science that took place in the Early Modern period (16th and 17th century) was accompanied and promoted by the proliferation of medical writing materials, enhanced, in turn, by two synergic factors. On the one hand, the spread of the printing press that facilitated the divulgation of the medical prose until then restricted to high learned contexts; and on the other the increasing demand of vernacular texts whose principal sources were Latin or French treatises (Pahta 2001; Siraisi 1990; Siraisi 2007).

The vernacularization of medical writing entailed for its part the introduction into English of an important amount of morpho-syntactic, lexical and discursive elements from the continental languages, particularly the aforementioned Latin and French (Taavitsainen et al. 2011, 24; Gotti 2001). Furthermore, these texts were largely still based on the classical medicine and supported by a scholastic though-style. This knowledge clashed with the emergence of the empiric paradigm fostered by new discoveries in the fields of anatomy and physiology.

In this context, some authors and practitioners began to modify the classical perspective by slightly introducing a modern approach. Thus, while the humoral theory still served to explain the physiological changes of the body, the Galenic one-sex model started to be questioned (Churchill 2005, 3). Along this line, a pioneering treatise devoted to the diseases of women was written by the French physician Jean Liébault at the end of the 16th century, and anonymously translated into English during the following century by hand. This valuable manuscript belonging to the Hunterian Collection and housed at the Glasgow University Library is the object of this study.

The volume contains the English version of the compendium of the three books written by Liébault, amounting about nine hundred pages and more than two hundred fifty thousand words. The prose includes theoretical and practical information exclusively dedicated to the diseases and conditions affecting women. Therefore, according to Taavitsainen and Pahta it can be classified as a specialized theoretical treatise (2011).

This unique text offers an excellent material to investigate the medical terminology associated with women precisely at the moment of that radical changes in the scientific world. Although much has been researched on the topic of early medical writing (Taavitsainen and Pahta 2011; Moskowich 2008; Norri 2004; Pahta and Nevanlinna 1997; Gotti 2001; Taavitsainen 2012; Calle-Martín and Romero-Barranco 2015, to cite but a few), the lexical and discursive treatment that women have received in those texts remains hitherto unaddressed. Thus, this study aims at analysing the linguistic features that were employed in a medical academic text purposely centred on women, with two main objectives: first, to identify specific words or constructions related to women, considering their lexical, semantic and discourse features, and secondly; to analyse whether these constructions were directly *adopted* from the French source, or instead *adapted* to the vernacular language.

Keywords: Early Modern English, medical writing, women, lexicon.

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